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ABSTRACT

There are many ways in which the school library can contribute to the personal growth of students with disabilities enrolled in mainstream schools and in fostering acceptance and understanding of these students by their non-disabled peers. A four-year study of school library provision for students with disabilities in two Australian states, Victoria and New South Wales, showed that provision of effective information literacy programs, a welcoming and physically accessible library environment, and access to information technology and electronic information sources can have a significant effect on the development of confidence, independence, and self-esteem in these students. Engaging disabled students as library monitors or offering the library as a work experience placement further assists independence and self-esteem and promotes a positive image of these students to their student colleagues. The provision of a good collection of disability information and sensitive fiction titles also promotes value and acceptance of disability by other students. (Contains 18 references.) (Author/MES)

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An inclusive school library for the 21st century : fostering independence

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Abstract

There are many ways in which the school library can contribute to the personal growth of students with disabilities enrolled in mainstream schools, and in fostering acceptance and understanding of these students by their non-disabled peers. A four year study of school library provision for students with disabilities showed that provision of effective information literacy programmes, a welcoming and physically accessible library environment, and access to information technology and electronic information sources can have a significant effect on the development of confidence, independence and self-esteem in these students. Engaging these students as library monitors or offering the library as a work experience placement further assists independence and self-esteem, and promotes a positive image of these students to their student colleagues. The provision of a good collection of disability information and sensitive fiction titles also promotes value and acceptance of disability by other students.

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Paper

Introduction

This paper focuses on the ways in which school library programmes can contribute to the personal growth of students with disabilities in mainstream schools, and in fostering acceptance and understanding of these students by their non-disabled peers. The impact of the

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integration and more recently the inclusion movement on most school systems means that more students with disabilities are attending mainstream schools. Some of these students are readily accepted, others suffer rejection from their classmates, their teachers or the parents of their classmates[1]. Students with disabilities may lack social skills and/or academic skills and it is vital that their self-esteem and confidence is established and maintained. The school library is an arena in which students have the opportunity to interact independently without the constraints of a classroom. It is also a source of unbiased information about disability. There are many opportunities for the school library to contribute to a successful mainstreaming programme.

Fostering Confidence, Self-esteem and Independence

Apart from facilitating acceptance by peers, students with disabilities need to develop positive self-concepts to enhance their ability to achieve academically, as a positive relationship between the two has consistently been found in research. Special educators suggest this may be achieved by : giving praise for achievement; engaging in co-operative learning; sharing games and activities with other students; being given the opportunity to demonstrate expertise; and by being given responsibility[2]. Strategies to encourage other students to have positive attitudes to students with disabilities might include : changing attitudes with information about disability; teachers providing a positive role model; and creating opportunities for interaction between students with disabilities and student peers[3].

Hopkins[4] investigated the relationship of the school library to the development of students' self-concepts. Her review of previous research identified six factors that contributed to positive self-concepts in students : opportunities for collaboration or teamwork with other students; independence; success; a positive and welcoming learning environment; challenge in learning situations; and a feeling of personal value or acceptance. Hopkins' research revealed that the school library could play an important part in the development of positive self-concepts in students and consequently academic achievement. Heeks & Kinnell also identified the importance of creating a welcoming library environment in their study of the role of learning support for Year 7 pupils with learning difficulties[5].

The Study

The author has just completed a four year study which evaluated school library services provided to students with disabilities in mainstream schools in two Australian states, Victoria and New South Wales. The primary research method was case study, which involved interviews with school librarians, special educators and students with disabilities in 14 primary and secondary schools. There is a paucity of research in the special education field that has involved the participation of young people with disabilities, and this influenced the decision to interview students. A total of 37 students were interviewed, and observation of students with disabilities using the school library also took place. Students with a wide range of disabilities, from learning difficulties to sensory and physical disabilities, were included. Students were asked about the amount of use they made of the library, and how they went about finding information. They were asked about access to various library facilities such as the catalogue, shelves, and study areas. Other issues explored were the use of CD-ROMs and other software, acquisition of information skills, use of public libraries, and reading interests. The students were encouraged to talk about specific things they did or did not like about the library.

Results

The study showed that the case study school libraries did contribute to the development of positive concepts in some of the areas identified by McAfee, particularly in providing opportunities for collaboration and teamwork, in exercising independence, and in creating perceptions of value and acceptance. The importance of the library in providing a welcoming, comfortable and accessible environment was also substantiated. Information collected from

interviews with students, school library staff and special education teachers is used in the following discussion.

The Library as a Facility

Research shows that the attitude of teachers to students with disabilities can influence the attitude of other students[6]. The first step to be taken to ensure the library appears to be welcoming to students with disabilities is to consider the attitudes of all the library staff to disability. This is likely to be positive due to the "helping" nature of the library profession, but some staff development activities in this area can be easily run by the use of existing videos and training packages[7], without the use of an external facilitator.

Although some students find it difficult to use the school library without the support of an aide, others find it is one place where they can manage independently, because the library staff are there to assist them, just as they are for any other student. The classic use of the library by students with disabilities as a retreat from the playground was not found to be common in the case study schools. Most students interviewed liked the library because it was a pleasant place to go. This may be to some extent to escape from undesirable elements in the playground, but most valued the library as somewhere to relax, talk quietly with friends, or use computers. Some schools operate buddy systems where students with disabilities are paired with a student colleague to use the library or read together.

In ensuring that the library has a welcoming environment, physical accessibility is essential. One special education teacher pointed out that for some students with physical disabilities, the school library might be the only library that is available to them. This is because either their local public library is inaccessible, or the student's family may not have the means for transporting them to the public library. Most library staff are aware of the more commonplace requirements of physical access, such as ramps. Less obvious features of good physical access were catered for in some libraries, such as providing at least one enquiry terminal at wheelchair height, and ensuring that there is sufficient space between shelving for wheelchairs to be manoeuvred. Many students who used wheelchairs became very frustrated at the barriers they encountered in libraries. Often only one door was available to them, so that they had to do something different from other students, such as always going out of the "in" door because there was more likely to be somebody there to hold it open for them. They would be trapped in bays of shelving where there was not enough room to turn around and one end was closed because it was flush to a wall. Unfortunately most libraries are restricted by space so that students in wheelchairs have to rely on library staff or other students to access material for them on higher or lower shelves. Several students with physical disabilities expressed great frustration at being limited in their browsing in this way.

Confidence in using the school library is an important factor, which can then lead on to public library use. Many students with intellectual disabilities will have a large amount of leisure time in adult life, and special educators concentrate on providing outlets for this. Many of the special education teachers took students with intellectual disabilities to the local public library as part of their living skills programme, but the school librarians were unaware that this was happening. The outcomes of the study as a whole showed there was a poor level of co-operation between school and public libraries, and this is one instance where the school librarian could have facilitated a process.

Information Literacy

Reading can be an important recreation for some students, especially those with physical or sensory disabilities who may not be able to participate in sport, and for students who may never be employed full time. Provision of fiction in alternative formats such as large print and audio is needed to ensure all students have access to recreational reading material. Storytelling has been linked to the acquisition of literacy skills for students with disabilities[8]. This activity

is not frequently undertaken in secondary schools where it is particularly important as a motivational strategy to encourage students with learning disabilities to read, and also to benefit from hearing books which they are not be able to read on their own. Storytelling to groups of students with disabilities was common practice in primary schools, but although most secondary school librarians were aware of the value of picture books for students with learning disabilities, only one was observed to regularly read to students.

For students with disabilities, the opportunity to become information literate offers a lifelong tool which can encourage the building of self-esteem and independence. Information skills classes in the library often make use of peer tutoring and co-operative learning which have been found to benefit many children with learning disabilities. Most school librarians worked closely with special education teacher in planning content, and adapting worksheets and other material to suit individual student's needs. Where possible, school librarians would offer one to one instruction to students, or modify the expectations for individual students. Often in primary schools, the library lesson was the time when the aide could leave the student to manage on their own, which again promotes independence. On the other hand, an aide might be indispensable in the case of a student with a considerable learning disability in a mainstream class. Whatever method was used, many students in case study schools were experiencing success in learning information skills. In one secondary school, one of the special education teachers had become very enthusiastic about teaching information skills to her class of students with intellectual disability. She worked with her students on research skills, and taught them how to use the enquiry terminals. The class was also learning how to use the circulation system. The school librarian believed that these students could learn the information skills process, provided the process was broken down into many "sub-steps". She and the special education teacher worked on this together with considerable success.

Information Technology

Computers, whether used for recreation or to access information, are an important tool for students with disabilities. Research has demonstrated that many students with learning disabilities respond very positively to auditory and visual stimuli as opposed to print media[9]. For children whose mobility is limited, email and other Internet tools focus on the content of the communication rather than personality or physical attributes, so that students can interact as "equals" without the encumbrances which sometimes isolate them, such as wheelchairs, canes or physical appearance[10]. This method of communication contributes to the self-worth of students, because it is current highly used technology, and for those with limited mobility the use of electronic communication has great advantages for shopping, banking and gaining employment.

Adaptive technology, such as specialised keyboards, voice output devices and large print screens can facilitate independence for students whose fine motor capacity is limited, but not one case study school had such technology available in the library. Lewis[11] states that, aside from the way technology can facilitate access to resources such as print and software, for students with disabilities it can lead to :

- improvements in academic performance and classroom behaviour, as well as increased motivation and more positive self-concept;
- changes in the way students with disabilities are perceived by their peers; since they can achieve more on their own, they are perceived to be more capable.

Mendrinos[12] found that CD-ROM technology was a great leveler in enabling students to access information successfully regardless of their previous academic ability. School librarians interviewed by Mendrinos found that students were able to more easily narrow their searches by using CD-ROM reference tools and gain a better understanding of which subject headings or keywords to use, and then transfer this knowledge to search other catalogues and indexes. Much of this is attributed to the way that CD-ROM indexes divide topics into subtopics, which

helps all students, not just students with disabilities, to define their topic and search for relevant information. Many of the librarians and special education teachers in case study schools commented on the fact that students with learning disabilities used CD-ROM tools very effectively. The computerised library system used by the majority of NSW schools, OASIS, also has a very simple menu driven searching interface which students could use effectively. Several school librarians observed however that students with learning disabilities found complex Internet searching more difficult.

Student Assistance in the Library

Allowing students with disabilities to assist in the library during library lessons, or to become library monitors, can help to build up their confidence and self-esteem, and to promote their acceptance by other students. Sometimes this may require a great deal of patience and perseverance on the part of the library staff, but there are many benefits. As early as the 1970s librarians were finding that allowing children with quite severe disabilities to help in the library presented a pathway to eventually motivate an interest in books and reading[13]. More recently Dorell has reported how involving a student with a behavioural disorder in helping in the library broke the cycle of failure for this student and restored his self-esteem[14]. Dorell found that he had underestimated the capabilities of this student. In one of the case study schools, a small group of students with intellectual disabilities visit the library on a weekly basis. Each week two of the students take responsibility for returning the groups books and reshelving them, and issuing new ones. They have been gradually taught these skills and been given the responsibility by a very empathetic librarian, who recognises there are occasional mistakes but is prepared to wear it. To her the confidence gained by these students is more important. Several case study schools have students with disabilities who act as library monitors. Apart from the status and acceptance this gives students, it is particularly helpful for students with intellectual disabilities in offering an opportunity to learn and practise social skills. The status of library staff as role models is important in this context.

For older students in transition programmes, the school library has proved to be a successful placement for work experience. In one case study school the school library had an ongoing role as a work placement for students in the support unit for intellectual disability. The willingness of the librarian to be involved in this way provided more opportunities for the students but also enhanced her relationship with the special education teachers. Jilbert[15] discusses the prevocational skills such as "…responsibility for actions, initiative, care of materials, punctuality, and task completion" which can be provided by working in the school library. She emphasises the value of the library as a work placement because a great variety of tasks can be learnt, many of which are transferable to other workplaces. Jilbert concludes, like Dorrell, that the experience of working in the school library can change stereotyping and result in the student being regarded as "capable and productive" (p.77).

Value and Acceptance of Students with Disabilities by other Students

School librarians can promote positive images of people with disabilities through the library collection. All case study libraries maintained a good collection of non-fiction about disability. They also provided appropriate materials in the teacher reference collection, selected to support the teaching of both special education teachers and classroom teachers. Most school librarians were aware of the range of fiction titles now available which portray disability in an understanding and empathetic way and had weeded earlier patronising and over-emotional books from the collection.

Conclusion

Many school librarians interviewed focussed on providing a good service to all students, and were responding to initiatives brought about by the shift to local management of schools, such as quality management. Those who had good managerial and communication skills were the

ones who delivered services successfully to students with disabilities. They were able to use strategies identified in research to contribute to the personal growth of students with disabilities, especially in offering co-operative learning and sharing activities with other students, giving students responsibility, providing positive role models, and changing attitudes with information about disability. An interesting phenomenon was the way the presence of the researcher in the school acted as a catalyst, and focussed the attention of the librarians on the needs of students with disabilities. Even the most dynamic school librarians admitted that interaction with the research project had increased their awareness.

Several Australian schools are creating learning support centres which involve administrative amalgamation of special education, information technology support and school library services[16]. Computers, software, books, curriculum materials, and teaching resources are all available in one location alongside personnel who can provide learning support, information technology support, and expertise on resources. Dyson[17] and Heeks & Kinnell[18] have observed similar developments in the United Kingdom. If this trend continues the involvement of the school librarian in the personal growth of students with disabilities will be increased.

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